

# 'Climategate' gives ammo to global warming skeptics

USA TODAY

December 10, 2009 Thursday

FINAL EDITION

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 12A

**Length:** 572 words

## Body

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One unfortunate legacy of Watergate, which drove Richard Nixon from the presidency 35 years ago, is that every subsequent, lesser scandal has been given the "-gate" suffix. The list includes Billygate, Debategate, Filegate, Travelgate, Troopergate and dozens of other mostly inconsequential and forgettable flaps. Now, just in time for the global warming conference in Copenhagen, comes Climategate, the controversy over thousands of e-mail messages

and documents purloined from the computers of British climate scientists.

The first thing to know about Climategate is that, despite the uproar, it doesn't prove global warming is a fraud. And let's stipulate up front that we don't condone electronic theft; if a crime was committed, the hackers should be tracked and prosecuted.

That said, the e-mails do reflect a disturbing level of pettiness, groupthink and willingness to disguise inconvenient data among leading climate scientists. Some of the messages, stolen from the prestigious University of East Anglia, come across like something out of Michael Crichton's best-selling 2004 novel *State of Fear*, in which environmentalists misrepresent facts and threaten critics to attract funding and advance their arguments about global warming.

In one such exchange, Phil Jones, director of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit, asks colleagues to delete certain messages that were subject to a freedom-of-information request. In another, Jones, who has stepped down temporarily amid the furor, describes an effort to "hide the decline" in temperatures when he put together a graph for the cover of a report for policymakers.

The graph, which showed steadily escalating temperatures in recent decades, blended data from tree rings with thermometer readings. Although scientists had earlier identified the technique, this is the sort of shortcut that, once exposed, feeds conspiracy theories and provides ammunition to those who support a do-nothing approach.

By hiding and distorting information, the climate scientists have delivered what global warming skeptics could not: hard evidence that some researchers are cooking the books. But poor judgment at one research center does not equal a global conspiracy.

The overwhelming scientific consensus remains that the Earth is warming, largely because of human activity, with potentially calamitous consequences involving melting ice caps, rising sea levels and shifting agricultural patterns.

The World Meteorological Organization reported Tuesday that 2000-09 seems to be the warmest decade in the modern era. Debate continues over the degree to which human activity is responsible and how quick and severe

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the impact will be. The argument will not be resolved quickly because there are many complex variables, including solar activity and ocean currents.

But neither uncertainty nor the scientists' shoddy behavior is an excuse for failing to address causes that have been identified, particularly the global rise in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. With world leaders gathered in Denmark, the U.S. needs to firmly join the effort to control that threat.

Ultimately, perhaps some good can come from Climategate. The harsh spotlight should keep other scientists focused on scientific discovery, not political advocacy. It's important for researchers to be frank about what they don't know. The way to resolve the uncertainties is to hash them out in the scientific arena, not to bury the evidence.

## Graphic

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PHOTO, B/W, Axel Schmidt, AFP/Getty Images

**Load-Date:** December 10, 2009

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